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GUY DE COINETET

OVERDUIN AND KITE, LOS ANGELES
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Much in the way that Bas Jan Ader became a posthumous artworld favourite almost overnight, the late French-Californian artist Guy de Cointet is having a 'moment' in contemporary art; institutions worldwide are restaging his performances from the 1970s, scholarly biographical texts are being written and his few artworks are being hauled out of storage and returned to the spotlight. While in his lifetime Cointet's abstract theatrical productions occurred largely at the margins of Los Angeles's hip West Coast performance art scene (too calculated for pedestrian art happenings and too oblique for traditional theatre), his work now takes centre-stage in Overduin and Kite's methodical presentation of drawing, painting, sculptural props and performance documentation from the early 1970s right up until Cointet's death, in 1983.

At first glance, the show's eight drawings on white paper threaten to disappear entirely on the gallery's white walls. Yet these airy surfaces reveal different and meticulously graphic renderings of lines, each an invented system for diagramming language. *Through the Night* (1972), for example, moves a single line along an invisible alphabetical axis, transforming the words of the work's title into a lightning-like zip. *Deep in the Vast Heart of Africa* (1978) translates these very words into a kind of new-wave semaphore in which each letter becomes a square divided by bold, black diagonal streaks. The earliest of these pieces, *Twist That Dial* (1971), is perhaps the most legible of Cointet's textual drawings; in felt-tip marker, the phrase 'Twist that dial. Turn that knob' is spelled out using only fragments of vertical and horizontal outlines from each letter. Although the words are economically reduced to a basic array of hatchings, its message reads clearly, reminding the viewer of TV-land (where the talking heads

demand, "Don't touch that dial") and acting like a slogan for the frenetic condition of the mass media.

Cointet often turned to television and Hollywood as source material for his drawings (which often recount soap opera-like scraps of narrative) and for performances like *Tell Me* (1979), in which three actresses conduct monologues alongside cryptic little objects – two of which are displayed on Overduin and Kite's office coffee table much like the domestic set dressing they were created as. Even the meaningless cipher of the six red-stencilled paintings on view – works that served as a backdrop for *Viva* in the 1974 performance *The Paintings of Sophie Rummel* – were taken from licence plates, phone numbers and signage scavenged from LA. Performances like this and the 1976 work *At Sunrise... A Cry Was Heard* (which the gallery restaged prior to the exhibition's opening) take the form of art interpretation – that is, an actress explaining a painting to her audience. Yet Cointet's situations quickly become farcical, and in the end, the 'reading' of his artwork remains unclear. Similarly, this exhibition's particular mix of documentation, objects and drawing makes plain that Cointet's work is less about trying to decode the language of art than it is about the unpretentious pleasure of just looking at art, an assertion that makes the undertakings of criticality and art history seem delightfully immaterial. *Catherine Taft*

Guy de Cointet, 2007 (installation view). Photo: Joshua White.
Courtesy Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

